

Childhood Hearing Loss Increasing in the U.S., Study In Pediatrics Finds

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The incidence of hearing impairment among children rose by 15% between 2001 and 2011, according to a [study](#) published last week in *Pediatrics*, an online publication of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The article, “Changing Trends of Childhood Disability,” reported an overall increase of 15.6% in childhood disabilities of all types over that period of time.

For their study, the authors used data collected from nearly 200,000 subjects by the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) from 2001–2002, 2004–2005, 2007–2008, and 2010–2011. They noted that the findings from 2001–2011 represent a continuation of a growing prevalence of childhood disability over the past 50 years.

Despite the overall increase in disabilities over the latest 10-year period studied, the incidence of physical disability health conditions in children actually declined by 12%. However, that was more than made up for by a 21% increase in disabilities related to mental and neurodevelopmental health, such as such as ADHD and autism.

FASTER INCREASE AMONG MORE AFFLUENT FAMILIES

The five authors reported that a disproportionate percentage of the nearly 6 million children who were disabled in 2010–2011 lived in poverty. The highest rate of disability, 102.6 cases per 1000 population in 2010–2011, was found in that economic sector.

Surprisingly, however, the largest *increase* in the disability rate, 28.4% over the 10-year period, was found among children living in households with incomes 400% or more above the federal poverty level. According to the writers, this was the first time since the NHIS began tracking childhood disability in 1957 that prevalence occurred disproportionately among socially advantaged families. They noted, “This unexpected finding highlights the need to better understand the social, medical, and environmental factors influencing parent reports of childhood disability.”

While the study did not examine why this occurred, Amy J. Houtrow, MD, PhD, the lead author and chief of the Division of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, [speculated](#) that it may be because there is less stigma attached to getting help for a disability than in the past.”

Her co-authors were Kandyce Larson, PhD, and Lynn M. Olson, PhD, both on the AAP staff; Paul W. Newacheck, DrPH, of the University of California at San Francisco; and Neal Halfon, MD, of the University of California at Los Angeles.

ASHA CALLS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

In a statement responding to the article in *Pediatrics* study, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) noted that along with the rise in hearing problems from 2001 to 2011, the study found a whopping 63% increase among U.S. children in disability associated with

speech problems. ASHA stated that the findings “underscore the importance of early intervention for rising numbers of children who are experiencing communication disorders.”

Elizabeth McCrea, PhD, president of the Rockville, MD-based association, said, “While the reasons behind the marked increase in speech and hearing problems may not be fully clear, the data argue for continued improved awareness among parents and the larger public about these disorders as well as speedy intervention at their earliest warning signs.”

She added, “Unlike many other conditions, early intervention often has the potential to prevent or reverse a communication disorder—or at least dramatically reduce the negative consequences it has on children’s academic and social success as well as their overall development. This is why ASHA urges parents to educate themselves about the signs and seek an assessment from a speech-language pathologist or audiologist if they have any concern at all.”